E-Government in Caribbean States: From Rhetoric to Reality

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OVERVIEW

Caribbean States have undertaken E-Government initiatives to streamline administrative processes and to improve customer service. Meanwhile there has predictably been much hype surrounding such moves with lofty promises being made about the "leveling of the playing field". As with current E-Commerce efforts in this region there has not been the ready acceptance and support that might have been expected. This contribution focuses on the E-Government initiatives made by Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Barbados, perhaps the most developed of the English speaking Caribbean States and represents the initial phase of a larger project aimed at determining the Caribbean reality with respect to E-Government.

BACKGROUND

The three countries chosen for this study have been the leaders among English speaking Caribbean states in terms of their political, economic and developmental status. Jamaica (population of 2.6m) and Barbados (population of 0.25m) have followed very similar paths towards socio-economic development having had an agricultural and, more recently, small manufacturing background. Trinidad and Tobago (population of 1.3m) although having some involvement in those areas has an economy built on oil and gas resources contributing approximately 25% of its GDP. These countries share a common historical, political and cultural tradition and are all members of a regional grouping of English speaking countries called the CARICOM Community.

The removal of trade preferences enjoyed by these States in their trade dealing, mainly with Europe, has seen them gravitating towards a services economy. This international business and financial sector is characterized by fierce global competitiveness with corporations in the developed countries being very demanding in their dealings with their outsourcing partners. Information and Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) have become critical components for both public and private sector agencies in transacting business.

ICT investments in over three decades have led to some gains in efficiency and effectiveness but much more is required. Indeed these countries have since the Nineties undertaken Public Sector Reform (PSR) to improve administrative capacity and reduce bureaucracy. Such reform has identified the need for better information availability and greater application of information systems in the public sector. Thus while the link between ICT and PSR has definitely been recognized, there has also been the realization that, in at least one of these countries, the public sector information systems might have been haphazard, if not archaic. Stagnation after earlier gains from such systems and failure to undertake evaluation of ICT implementation have been suggested to be major hindrances in the realisation of full benefits from use of these new technologies.

The temptation then might be to leapfrog and fast track the establishment of portals to bring these developing countries into the Information Society. About such thinking and the adoption of E-Government itself, Heeks cautions:

"Simply pulling Northern and/or private sector solutions off the shelf and trying to impose them on public sectors in developing countries will be like driving square pegs into round holes. E-Government solutions must be adapted, not simply adopted, to ensue that the design matches Southern realities."

He further identified two other challenges facing developing countries, namely e-readiness and large design-reality gaps, i.e. differences between design ideas and organizational realities in small States. While E-Government presents outstanding opportunities to effect more efficient and effective service delivery, planning of the transformation to E-Government is perhaps the single most important issue facing most governments today.(Sharma and Gupta 2003)

The introduction of E-Government in small states has also been likened to the creation and sustained development of an organization associated with which there are:

- external fundamentals related to its existence within its environment and community.
- internal and external stimuli contributing to its success and sustainability.

While there are challenges and threats to its eventual development, the opportunities and benefits can be most attractive. Among the critical success factors suggested for successful E-Government transformation are:

- entrepreneurship with risk taking and astute business management in this strategic undertaking. The nurturing role of project champion is very crucial.
- alliances with the private sector, other governments and international agencies.(Bishop and Savoury 2004)

CARIBBEAN E-GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

Globally the move towards E-Government has been as a result of pressure from citizens groups, the private sector, other governments or even international agencies. Over jealous politicians may even see it as a way to boost their stakes in the eyes of the electorate. Governments have adopted different approaches towards the adoption of E-Government globally in both developed and developing countries.

The participation of Caribbean states in the World Summit of the Information Society and the assistance of the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC) have been of tremendous help in the planning and transformation of their E-Government initiatives.

Sharma and Gupta (2003) have conceptualized a framework for E-Government implementation which will be used to evaluate the initiatives undertaken by the three States. This has been chosen since its building blocks correspond closely to the actual approach taken by the countries. The following phases in the transformation to E-Government are outlined:

i. the creation of a network and technical infrastructure in the form of public data communication network infrastructure and servers, e.g. internet, intranets.
ii. the digitization and data integration process with document management systems, e-mail, data management systems and data warehouses.
iii. the availability of internet and web-enabled E-government service with departmental web sites providing static information as well as two-way communication. The ultimate stage is the provision of a portal facilitating self service applications.
iv. the facilitation of user access to web-enabled services through multiple communication channels and access points, e.g. cell phones and personal digital assistants.

This framework should have a supporting infrastructure which would, inter alia:

v. create E-Government awareness.
vi. build a legal and regulatory infrastructure.
vii. create a critical mass of manpower and skills.

ECLAC conducted a series of surveys of various Caribbean states, including Jamaica, Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago, in 2006 in which progress towards the creation of an Information Society was investigated. The results of those surveys can be evaluated based on the above framework.

Phase 1 – creation of technical infrastructure. All states have completed the liberalization of their telecommunications sectors and there is vibrant competition between service providers. Internet access varies from 40 and 55 % of population in Jamaica and Barbados respectively to 12% in Trinidad and Tobago. Between 60 and 100% of the populations have mobile phones with broadband access estimated at about 10% . Regulatory institutions e.g. Fair Trading Commissions and Telecommunications Units have been set up. Some governments have also removed the import duty on computer equipment.

Phase2 – data integration process. After over 3 decades of computerization the public sector abounds with on-line computer applications e.g. collection of taxes. Customs modernization programmes have been undertaken and initial steps are being made to implement specialized applications such as geographical information systems. Public sector accounting and human resources functions are integrated with the SMARTSTREAM system.

Phase 3 – E-Government and ICT-related portals. Most ministries and several public sector units in the states have established a web presence. These are maintained by computer units within individual units and ministries. There are however central information technology centres in each state which have ultimate responsibility for that state's official Portal. These Portals are expected to be fully functional within 2 years. Currently static information is provided on most web-sites.

Phase 4 – User access. The states are not currently at the stage to tackle this aspect.

Phase 5 – Creation of E-Government awareness. The states have all established E-Government Units as well as E-Commerce Units to coordinate their initiatives. Additionally progress has been made towards the development of National Strategic ICT Plans with coordination by National Committees. To provide a more focused thrust specific responsibility for ICTs has been assigned to a particular ministry. There is in each state a high-powered committee, e.g. *the Fast Forward* Steering Committee in Trinidad and Tobago, comprising Government Ministers and Senior Officials which provides oversight, strategic guidance and sign-off on the matter of a National ICT Strategy.

Phase 6 – Legal and regulatory infrastructure. Both Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago have passed or have under consideration some legislation dealing with electronic and digital crime. Barbados has actual legislation on Electronic Transactions, IT Misuse and Consumer Protection with Data Protection and Freedom of Information Bills under active consideration. In Trinidad and Tobago Computer Misuse, Freedom of Information and Electronic Transfer of Funds Crime Acts have been passed but Data Protection and Digital Signatures Bills have been circulated for comment. Jamaica, on the other hand, has only Freedom of Information legislation.

Phase 7 – Creation of critical mass. E-Learning initiatives have been undertaken in all states at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels with teacher training accorded a high priority. International agencies e.g Inter-American Development Bank have funded several initiatives in the educational sector. Computer literacy programmes are available. In Barbados, for example, there is a government-sponsored Community Technology Programme providing training at the community level in Internet and e-mail usage, word processing and other basic IT skills.

Overall the three states appear to be approaching the transformation to E-Government in a satisfactory manner according to the framework cited. With the accustomed regional consultations between them, they have been able to benefit from each others experiences. Furthermore the involvement of ECLAC has been of considerable assistance in the formulation and development of these E-Government initiatives.

FURTHER WORK

This contribution reports on the initial aspect of the project, namely the preparatory steps taken by the three states towards E-Government. Other aspects would be:

i.   Determination of their relative levels of e-readiness. Included herein could be the e-Government acceptance by citizens and stakeholders as well as their active involvement.
ii. Implementation issues being faced by the states.
iii. Possible comparisons with similar developing countries in terms of internet and economic capabilities in Asia to determine differences in approaches.
iv. Possible strategies for other developing countries not yet undertaking E-Government transformation.

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